

Book Reviews

Urban Design and the Bottom Line: Optimizing the Return on Perception

Dennis Jerke, Douglas R. Porter, and Terry J. Lassar

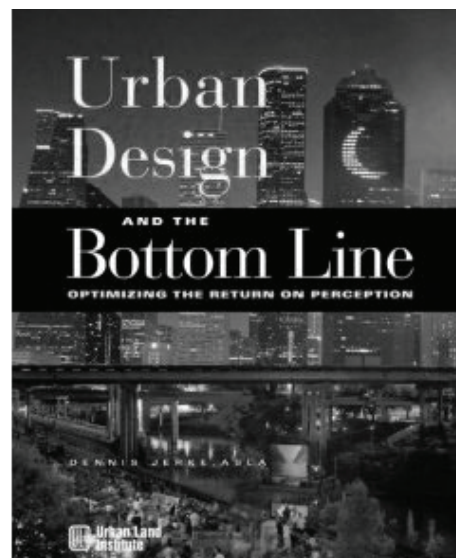
Reviewed by Amanda Campbell

A glowing stadium shaped like a large blue doughnut (Munich's Allianz Arena) and the "lively layouts and fresh designs" of The Grove (Los Angeles' lifestyle center) are but two of the colorful examples highlighted in *Urban Design and the Bottom Line: Optimizing the Return on Perception*, by Dennis Jerke and contributing authors Douglas R. Porter and Terry J. Lassar.

The work, recently published by the Urban Land Institute, highlights international urban design case studies and is accessible to any audience. Rather than serving as a textbook for urban design rules, this book paints broad principles using striking photographs and descriptive language. The authors use examples of success to demonstrate good urban design, backing up their claims with data and observed results. While the graphics alone would make it an excellent coffee-table book, the text contains a surprising amount of detail on a wide scope of material drawn from industry experts, making it an excellent resource for those unfamiliar with urban and environmental design. For practitioners, the case studies may inspire and justify future projects.

The authors define urban design principles to include visual imagery and spatial arrangement, integrating planning, architecture, and landscape architecture. The book's main premise is the concept of "return on perception," modeled after economic "returns on investment." Good urban design, the authors argue, is an investment that pays off in economic, social, cultural, and environmental returns – by improving city image, luring shoppers, providing a forum for social interaction, encouraging exercise, and increasing property values. In fact, good design brings measurable dividends: San Antonio's River Walk brought an estimated \$3.5 billion in tourism revenues, Chicago's Millennium Park stimulated a 25% increase in nearby property values, and Salt Lake City's TRAX light rail investments prevented the release of 260 million pounds of air pollution.

Urban Design and the Bottom Line is organized around five themes: Architecture, Green Infrastructure, Transportation, Water Settings and Implementation. Architecture is the most extensive, divided into residential, retail, higher education, and civic facilities. Green Infrastructure covers habitat as well as recreational elements of urban settings. Within the Transportation chapter, a focus on transit-oriented development



emphasizes that the urban area should be accessible through multiple means, including bicycle and pedestrian routes. There are also sections on improving highway, airport, and bridge design. Water Settings addresses design principles, success stories, and restoration examples for streams and rivers, ponds, and waterfronts. Finally, the Implementation chapter highlights the importance of including the aforementioned elements in any cohesive, viable development or neighborhood.

Throughout the text, the authors emphasize a holistic approach to sustainable urban design, drawing from best practices in Smart Growth, New Urbanism, livable communities, land use-transportation integration, green infrastructure, and environmental quality. The authors highlight returns gained through projects' context

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sensitivity, economic benefits, and environmental benefits. Principles of environmental design are thoroughly integrated; one section serves as an environmental science primer on the effects of urban form on water quality and habitat.

There are very few notable flaws in *Urban Design and the Bottom Line*. The book's key principles are repeated often to direct the flow, but are perhaps over-emphasized. Another criticism is that the author asserts one unverified claim as fact: that the National Environmental Policy Act is the "overarching umbrella" of most environmental laws. In reality, the Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act, and Clean Water Act, as well as other federal policies and numerous state and local conservation ordinances, are each administered separately.¹ One tactic that this reviewer might suggest would be to include examples and pictures, as bases of comparison, of urban designs that failed aesthetically, economically, or socially. Nonetheless, these comments are outshined by the book's numerous merits mentioned above.

Urban Design and the Bottom Line is recommended for anyone interested in how urban design can increase the value of places. For those less familiar with these concepts, it is a comprehensive introduction to sustainable design issues and planning principles in general, with a touch of urban design history. For current practitioners, the book bolsters claims that good urban form yields more than just financial returns. Notably, it would also be an excellent resource for politicians or planning board members. Aside from its educational merits, the book is worth perusing for the awe-inspiring pictures and exciting urban design success stories drawn from the U.S. and abroad.

¹ NEPA required Environmental Impact Statements and a public input process for all federal projects causing significant environmental impacts, with the aim of improving decision analysis across agencies. Language in the bill expressed the intent to implement a holistic federal environmental policy; however, NEPA was only applied in practice to proposed actions, "not to the broader policies, legislative initiatives, or appropriations bills that underlay them" (from Andrews, Richard. 2006. *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves: A History of American Environmental Policy*, 2nd ed. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press).